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Arts & Culture

Cronies to the end: Ken Babbs talks of Ken Kesey and decades of merry pranksterhood

KLCC | By Brian Bull

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Photo provided by Ken Babbs.

Content advisory: The following transcript contains instances of profanity and references to drug use.

I'm Brian Bull for KLCC. Welcome to this extended version of my interview with Ken Babbs, recorded on January 5th, 2022. It was six days before his new work, "Cronies: a Burlesque" was released by Eugene's own Tsunami Books, and nearly six decades after Babbs, Ken Kesey, and others making up the Merry Band of Pranksters took off on a cross-country trip in a brightly-painted

bus named FURTHUR [sic]. It made counterculture history, and was featured in documentaries, including “MAGIC TRIP”.

DOCUMENTARY CLIP:

Woman: People didn’t think we were hippies or that we were drug freaks, because it wasn’t in the news yet.

Man: The public always grinned when they saw that bus.

Woman: We are the Merry Band of Pranksters!

Now at 86, Babbs has settled down with his wife and some farm animals near Dexter, Oregon. He visited KLCC studios to talk about his book, his friendship with Kesey, and experimentation with psychedelic drugs. Here’s our conversation, about an early chapter of “Cronies” after Kesey coached Babbs on a wrestling match, that didn’t go well.

Bull: I felt like a complete cultural illiterate when I hit this portion of your book. You know, I always thought that the “Merry Pranksters” was just some invention you came up with but it sounds like it's from Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel, the Merry Prankster*. That's a piece of classical music that you and Kesey sometimes listened to while you were tripping out, correct?

Babbs: Well, it was after he talked me into doing the wrestling match and I got my ass kicked. And he had given me a Benzedrine before to keep me up. And so we went back to my room in the dorm and we played that record over and over again all night long.

Ein kurtzweilig lesen von Dyl
Vlenspiegel geborē vß dem land zū Brunßwick. Wie
er sein leben volbracht hat, xcvi. seiner geschichten.



By Hans Baldung Grien (?) - rdk.zikg.net, Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6807091>

So then I researched Till Eulenspiegel and found out he was a real guy back in the 16th century, that would be doing merry pranks to people. And the one I wrote about was where he shoved a potato in the drain pipe that came down from the upstairs apartment that drained all the toilet. And this, all of sudden this woman came out there in her dress or nightgown, it was all sopping wet and screaming and yelling, and he laughed and galloped off.

And so when the time came where all the Pranksters were together at Kesey's house in the evening, sitting around and having a fire going in the yard and...Chuck Kesey, Kesey's brother, got Kesey and me, and he said, "I'll show you something." And we drove over to the coast a little ways away, and crossed a stream and went out into this cave, and had to crawl into this cave for a long time, and black as black as I've ever seen. It was so black, it was nothing and we came out of the cave, it opened up in the Pacific Ocean, and Chuck said, "This is a lookout point where during World War Two. They'd sit there with binoculars and watch out for submarines coming to shell the coast."

But the Japanese submarine commander read the code wrong that was sent to him and he thought they said the avocado orchards. So he went down to Santa Barbara and shelled the orchards there. I mean he really did! (*laughs*)

Bull: There was guacamole everywhere.

Babbs: Right! (*laughs*) People were happy. So anyway, we were sitting there talking, and we looked at all coming towards us...we didn't know that that day this earthquake happened in Alaska. And this tsunami was hitting the West Coast. I mean really a big, really going all the way down to California. And we realized, "Oh oh, it's coming right up into this cave!" So we turned and, you had to be on your hands and knees to get out of there. And I said that, if there were event in the Olympics, the hand-on-knees-crawl through the tunnel, we would have been the gold winners!

As we got out on the other side, there was that little creek we had to cross, was a raging torrent from all the water backing up y'know, from the tsunami hitting it. And Chuck says "Well, what are we going to do now?" And I said, "Tis I, the intrepid traveler. I will lead you across this creek!" And I stepped in the creek, and "Ahhh!"... my feet went out from under me. And I was heading for the ocean, but Kesey grabbed me by the collar and pulled me back and said, "Let's just wait here." And pretty soon the water went down, and we went crossing.



Provided by Dennis McNally.

So we went back to La Honda, and we got out of the car. And they're all down in this place, and Mike Hagen yelled, "Halt! Who goes there? And I said, "Tis I, the Intrepid Traveler come to lead my Merry Band of Pranksters across the continent in the opposite direction of the settlers. Our goal: the obliteration of the entire nation. No, no, no, we're not blowing up their buildings. We're blowing their minds!" And so that was the first hit of the word. The Merry Pranksters, We became the Merry Pranksters after that.

Bull: Do you still occasionally listen to that piece of music?

Babbs: You know, I could. I have a record player. I think I've still got that record, I'll have to do that. Yeah, it's a super piece of music.

Bull: It's on YouTube, too.

Babbs: Oh well, of course, of course.

Bull: Yeah, everything's on YouTube now. So yeah. No, I just never really knew that connection before until I read this book. So it was very enlightening.

Babbs: Yeah, well, nobody did. I mean, it covered like a period of '58 to '64, it was five to six years,

Bull: And Till Eulenspiegel, like you said was a character who defied convention. He was just a very mirthful kind of harmless person who just wanted to kind of thumb his nose at convention. It sounds like that was a pretty good inspiration for what you and Kesey and the other Merry Pranksters became.

Babbs: It was, but it was subliminal. It was all come from listening to that song, or that classical piece, because we never heard of him before.

Bull: (*laughs*) Classical music as a corrupting element.

Babbs: For sure.

Bull: Along with the influence that you and Kesey, and the Merry Pranksters had about, you know, going against the grain and conventionalism and what not, do you see anything yourself today rivals that? Anything that mirrors that, anything you're seeing as far as other performers, comedians, artists, anything at all that seems similar to what you did?

Babbs: Well, I don't know. Because what you say about going against the grain and all that, I think we worked all the time within the system. That we were not, when you're talking about counter culturists...yeah, that's means we don't participate in the regular media circus. But we work on our own...what would you call it? *Milieu*, and do what we can. Because Kesey at one time said, "The only true currency in the country is that of the spirit." And so if the spirit is high no matter how hard the times are and whatever oafs are in office, if you're spirit remains high we'll get through that and continue to be happy people.

You know, because what is it? "We hold these truths to be self evident, love, and happiness." Happiness as part of our thing that we're guaranteed from the Declaration of Independence. So it's really important to be happy. It's hard to be happy when bad things are happening. But if you can find somewhere, the meaning and the groove within that, you can come out of it okay and find happiness again. This is really another important thing we learned to do as pranksters. The groove, you want to find the groove. If you can find the groove and ride the groove, you can get through just about anything. Grief is so real. You cannot try to stifle grief or not deal with it. No, you got to live it. You got to let it take over and do its thing and then find the groove again.

The most important thing that's happening to people is what's happening in their minds . People get into their mindset, that can't get off of, I think they should teach a course in high school, how to control your thoughts, that if you have thoughts that are bringing you down and bad, you want to deal with those and there's only one way you can deal with them, and that's to think happy thoughts.



Photo provided by Ken Babbs.

It's like the I Ching says, is evil...if you go against it, butt evil head to head, it gets stronger, and you get weaker. So the secret then is in your mind is to always have some kind of happy thoughts you can bring in when you start having a bad thought. But you got to be aware of this, like I am doing it all the time. As a writer, I'm always thinking plots, or actions. I've read too many mysteries and detective novels, which the action can...is, ah, people getting beat up or a shot or shooting back and all that kind of stuff like Westerns, and so on.

And so any time I start thinking any thought like that, a movie plot or a book plot, I'm like "Shut up. We don't want that. That's no good. We're not doing that." And so then I tried to think of some great thing instead of that, well "Let's have somebody get up on stage and then perform out of the audience. And bring everybody to their knees". (*laughs*) So anyway, that's what sort of, I think, one of the main things that's happening is these people that are wild and crazy and have these crazy thoughts and that, they just got the wrong shit in their minds.

Bull: So you and Ken Kesey and many other members of the Merry Pranksters are icons of this subversive and counterculture movement sandwiched between Ginsberg and Kerouac's beat generation and the psychedelic movement of the 1960s. How is it that you've had such a time getting this book published? I know that you went through several publishers until Tsunami (Books) gave you the nod.

Babbs: Well, I had a previous book published called "Who Shot the Water Buffalo?" which went through the traditional New York publishing route, and I have an agent. So when I finished "Cronies", my agent tried to sell it and nobody in the regular publishing industry would touch it. Because it's all about the opportunity to make money and they did not see it as being any kind of thing that fell into any of their categories, you know, of mysteries, romance, action, all that kind of stuff. So everybody turned it down.

It was only through the luck of knowing Scott Landfield at Tsunami Books and talking to him about it and him saying that 'Well, I want to start a press. Let's make "Cronies" the first book out of the press.' I said, 'Fine!' and. It's been wonderful and perfect in every way. And it proves something that everybody should know, is that we don't have to go through New York City or the East Coast to accomplish things. We have put out a book here which is better I think, than anything they would ever have done.

Bull: Every author wants their book to be appreciated and read by everyone of course, but is there any one particular audience you'd like to read "Cronies"?

Babbs: Well, there's a huge audience out there in terms of the Deadheads, by the millions. Pranksters now are into their fifth generation pranksters. And then I have the literary crowd from the knowing about Kesey and me and the books we've published. Then just general reading people who like to read because this is a very readable book.

Bull: "Cronies", opens with Jack Kerouac unfurling this long scroll of his travels and perspectives, which would eventually be published as "On the Road" in 1957. And the fact that you included this at the beginning of your novel "Cronies", Ken...is this to make the case that "On the Road" was the launch pad for the Merry Pranksters?

Babbs: It was a big influence on us, yes. As writers, Kesey and me and everybody else that wrote, because it was the idea of writing just off the cuff, without thinking ahead of time, but just laying it down. You know, when “On the Road” came out, it was heavily edited. Lately, maybe a year or so ago, they've published a volume of “On the Road”, the original scroll. So I got that and read that and oh my God, it's a thousand times better than the edited one. There's stuff in there that they took out.

One of the best ones is Kerouac was in this hotel room in Denver and (Neal) Cassady and (Allen) Ginsberg were sitting on the bed, naked, cross legged, facing one another and rapping back and forth. And Kerouac? You know, he must have a photographic memory to be able to do this -- he had that whole rap in that scroll. They didn't put any of that in the edited version, but it's fantastic. (laughs)

Bull: I really enjoyed the escapades of you and Kesey and all the Pranksters, whether it was the early formative years when you're getting to know each other. He's coaching you on your wrestling moves, or the bus trip, of course had a lot of misadventures and there's a lot of wordplay on the road, exposition, there's just a lot... craziness. And there's this kinetic energy that comes from just reading every page. Did you kind of feel that energy as you wrote it?

Babbs: Yes, very much so. It was it was really an easy book for me to write. You know, my wife Eileen, taught English at South Eugene High School for 19 years. In American Lit, they read “(One Flew Over the) Cuckoo's Nest” and in AP English they read, “Sometimes a Great Notion.” And she'd have me come in and talk to every class for 19 years and so I accumulated a whole pile of notes I'd make before I'd go in and give me an idea what I was going to talk about. And I was looking them over, I saw that this could be a book, talking about how Kesey and I met, the escapades we had and then I just kept adding on all the other people that we have done stuff with over the years, 43 years, from 1958 to 2001 when he died.

Bull: One thing I thought was captivating is when the Merry Pranksters began the “Looking for a Kool Place” journey on their bus, it went from the West Coast all the way up to New York City and was billed as a reversal of westward expansion, the Oregon Trail in reverse. Do you feel that it was received that way by observers too?

Babbs: I don't know if they had that consciousness about it, but it was received very well because this was the first of its kind, and nobody knew what it was. But they could see it was something exciting the way it was painting. And the way we played instruments and were toodling and flutling, driving in. And kids recognized it right away as a converted school bus. And so everywhere we went, people were attracted to it and as we went across the country, stopping at different places and getting out and playing our instruments, and consorting with the people and getting into their drama, and adding to the drama, because we were shooting a movie of the whole trip. And so this would all become part of the movie.

And so by the time we got to New York City, and we're going through the streets of New York, we had it down. And so we'd be on top of the bus toodling and flutling, and waving and talking because we're all being recorded and it was being boomed out of the speakers and Cassady at the driver's seat: “There we go, we're at 13th Street, comin' out, we're almost to Harlem now, the best part of town far as I'm concerned. A vote for Barry is a vote for fun. Fun, fun fun!”

Bull: Which I recall, the bus was being driven in reverse in Arizona and Goldwater's backyard.

Babbs: Exactly right. When we got to Phoenix we decided to paint "A vote for Barry is a vote for fun!" on the side of the bus because he was running for president that year with a real strong pro-Vietnam War platform. And so that's that why we did that satire for fun, fun, fun. And then we drove backwards down Main Street with the sound system playing the "Stars and Stripes Forever." (Dah dah dah, dah dah dah....!) (*laughs*)

Bull: And I guess Goldwater himself kind of learned that incident and just simply told the local police to just let them be?

Babbs: Yes, yes. Yeah. He said, "Those are just some good old boys up in Gallup, let them have their fun." He didn't know what he was doing. (*laughs*)

Bull: Goldwater approved. And on this journey, this 1964 journey, you experienced Americana in many forms. We had segregated swimming areas, we had authoritarian police just itching to make drug busts, disillusionment with Vietnam and rampant consumerism, you know, in many forms, that you were experiencing and reflecting on. And I'm just curious to know, if you were to repeat the exact same trip today, do you think it'd be the same experience?

Babbs: Oh, God, no. It'd be totally different. Everybody would know what it was. And not only that, but everybody's into online stuff now more than actual life stuff. But you know, Zane Kesey - 50 years after the original bus trip- there is still a bus. It's not the original bus, it's the second one and it's all painted up and it's got all the sound gear, it's just exactly like the other one, only newer. He took it on the same route, as the original boss across the country and back.

And he found everywhere he went on the country in small places and stopped, there would be on Saturday night, a place where they'd all be out in the woods with a stage and a Grateful Dead band and everybody getting high on LSD and doing all the stuff that happened; the acid tests, various constant things in the 60s. And everywhere, he found these things, it makes you realize that under the radar -beneath the media scrutiny- are millions of people, grooving, and doing these things, and getting high and having fun, and keeping the spirit alive. And then during the day going and doing their regular daytime jobs. And still, it's a wonderful thing to know that the vibe is still there.

Bull: The 1966 Acid Test Album was finally produced and mixed and released by a Portland distributor in 2017 as a vinyl album (Babbs: Yeah.) and I checked on it last night out of curiosity and it sold out! What does that tell you?

Babbs: He's reprinting a thousand now. This is a tremendous guy up there at Jackpot Records in Portland and people can get it by calling or writing Jackpot Records. And yeah, he's sold 1500 of those already and it was really neat. He called me up one day and he says, "I want to redo this record. Could I get your permission?" I said, "Sure." And he said, you know, the original one didn't have any liner notes. He said, 'Would you be interested in writing liner rights liner notes? And I said' Sure thing. So he paid me for that and now it's got liner notes on it. And it's a super record.

Bull: The fact there are so many people that have purchased that and are listening to it, I think shows there's still a lasting influence that you and Kesey and the other Merry Pranksters, provided more than 50 years ago.

Babbs: Well, yeah, because what we were doing on that record in this studio, this guy had is in all night long, we had all our instruments set up and we have the whole sound system, the feedback loop set up. That was funny when I was setting everything up, Stanley Owlsley came in there and he saw what I was doing, so he went up to the owner of the studio, Jim the Host (a.k.a Jim Seagrave), and says “ God he says, you don't want Babbs in here. messing with your stuff, he's crazy!” *(laughs)*.



Photo provided by Dennis McNally.

That didn't faze any of us, we just kept going. We were in there 14 hours and he cut it down to the record. And those 14 hours of tapes, a good question is: What ever happened to them? He died and his wife had them, and then she died and then just disappeared. So you know a remaining thing is the Acid Test LP record, which you can still get from Jackpot Records in Portland. Every year in the country, they have a record day in which all the stores participate and they keep track of what they

sell. They try to sell their best things. And the year that he did that record, that record came out number 50 in the whole country.

Bull: That's remarkable.

Babbs: I know, that's good. Yeah, that's a trip. It's a real trip. It shows what we were really good at. We were at the top of our game, Kesey and I, making up stories back and up with instruments tripping out

Bull: And you know one of the quotes from your book I thought was very interesting too, and I'm just gonna read it out to you. And it says 'Pranksters are not just about acid; that's part of the picture, but on a personal level. If you push the use of the drugs, you lose people who are interested in spiritual development, the search for enlightenment and the seeking of expanded consciousness. Following that, the actions of helping one another out being kind to others, and most importantly, not adding to the polarization and arguing going on all over the place.' That's one of your quotes that opens one of the chapters of the book. So it's not just necessarily about tripping out (Babbs: No.) It sounds like there's a very strong component of being basically a decent human being.

Babbs: Responsibility. Exactly right. Exactly right. In fact, that's the best thing that ever happened to me on acid. When I first started taking it, as I was a frat rat college wise guy, and didn't know anything and making fun all kinds of stuff, but it woke me up. It made me realize no, there's a greater purpose in life and the purpose is to be kind to others and help others out. And this is really something like on the job. When you're on the job, lots of times you get into a job or there's some guy that's really bad to other people and causes strife and all that. So your job then is to get in there and cool it in some way or another by passing out drinks or however you can think of, without butting heads, but a change in attitude.

The best example I give is one back in the 60s when they're having the Vietnam anti-war rally in Berkeley in this big field. And we went there, and we were walking through the field and these guys in suits were harassing these protesters and trying to get them to fight them and everything, because they were provocateurs who were, and the cops were standing outside, ready to come in there and start beating up on people.

And so we come walking through there and Neal Cassady's got a pack of Dentyne and he opens it up and he takes out a stick, bites off a piece and walks through, saying "Dentyne, Dentyne, anybody? Cleans your breath, cleans your mind, cleans all the hatred out of your soul. Come on everybody. Dentyne! Dentyne!" And they all went, 'What? What?' and it just collapsed all the anchor and all, -- the rancor -- not "anchor!" (*laughs*).

All the stuff was going on and they just drifted apart and everything went on. And so this is something we really learned to do as pranksters and scenes when we get into seeing something going on. How to confuse them. You just have to confuse them for a minute. And it breaks the spell and the concentration. Take them sideways.

Bull: And there's a great quote, I think my dad had it on a plaque in his office a long time ago. It said something like: "If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit." And I thought that was golden.

Babbs: (*Laughs*) That's it!

Bull: But I recall that too, because there was another segment in that same portion of the book where I believe the Hells Angels were coming to crack heads at an anti-war rally or other -

Babbs: It was the same place. (**Bull: Yeah, they were -**) see because at the end of the rally, the protesters were gonna hike to Oakland to protest at the induction center. And so the Hells Angels were going to meet him at the boundary between Oakland and Berkeley and keep them from coming in. And (*laughs*) well, we had met the Hells Angels and they had been at a party at Kesey's. So he knew 'em and so we were up there, and everybody got high on LSD and Allen Ginsberg was there. And he, during the night, took off all his clothes and sat cross-legged on the living room floor, and played his little *ding ding ding ding ding ding* hand chimes and "ooh, woo ohm, ohm, ohm." And so the next day, we weren't there. But we came in later and we asked "Hey, what happened at the border?" "And they said "Aw, after sitting there all night, listen to that little bitty naked guy jingin' and ohm'ing, nobody wants to go and do anything." (*laughter*) Because the cops wanted it to happen. They wanted to be able to beat up on the Hells Angels and the protesters, both!

Bull: So it was just using your talents to de-escalate and distract and help break up any potential tensions and violence. That's something that could certainly be used today.

Babbs: All the time. Yeah. Because people are trying to go out each other all the time. So it's really important now to be able to, when you end up, do whatever you can to defuse the situation without butting heads. Because that just makes it worse.

Bull: You know, there are some general conceptualizations people have about the Acid Trip and the Merry Pranksters tour across the U.S. And I think a lot of people tend to think of a busload of long-haired hippies tripping out on illegal drugs, but in reading your book, you sound like a pretty straight-laced bunch. In your own words, there was no "long hairs" you know, you wore these big broadly striped, almost referee-type shirts, and LSD at the time was legal at least until 1966. (**Babbs: Yeah.**) You know, it was still an experimental escapade in many ways, but do you feel like there's some misconceptions people do have about the movement and your activities?

Babbs: Oh, certainly. Yeah. People don't know or weren't in the know, they get the wrong idea. Like there's a lot of people thought for a long time that we were passing around LSD to everybody when we were on the bus, and we never did that at all.

The reason for the shirts was we were filming this movie and everybody had their own shirt and wore it all the time. So that meant when you were cutting the film, you could have a scene from one place and use it in the other place. And you know, you'd have the same shirts on the same people and so we you could screw with time in the movie when editing. It's an old movie trick.

Bull: Continuity.

Babbs: Continuity! That's the word Yeah. (*laughs*)

Bull: But yeah, it was still very, I think groundbreaking and revolutionary. What do you think was your greatest influence? As far as any literary or cinematic or musical influences? Where do you think you and Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters touched some artists or society?

Babbs: I think it was our ability to improvise and do things off the cuff without a script. Scripts are good, but to be able to do this other thing and have it be a story that will have a beginning and a middle and an end and fulfill all those requirements. Like I say, Kesey and I started when we were in Stanford together doing it on the tape recorder and then after a while we 'd do it at his house on the floor . And we'd stay up all night and there'd be other guys on it too, like Ginsberg and Cassady and then Robert Stone, the famous author. He was the best because he could do characters.



Photo provided by Ken Babbs.

So we would try to do a whole long story all night long, and then because we were wanting to be successful at this, not only as artists but even financially as there was some kind of market for it. So the thing that made it like a job was after we did this, we'd have to listen to it or watch what we're doing because after we were doing this on the floor for a while, George Walker came in with 60

millimeter camera and we were up off the floor and acting out all these parts. We'd put on costumes and stuff. So this is the reason we decided to make a movie of the whole bus trip.

We actually thought that we would be able to do this, and it'd be on the big screen as a big time two-hour movie. It would be like a mocko-docu thing, reality mixed with inventions and all cut together. And come out with a beautiful soundtrack and everything. *(laughs)* But we got screwed up with the editing.

Bull: I heard that, one of the cameras or one of the pieces of equipment was somehow powered by the bus' engine or something and there was some synch issues?

Babbs: Well, we didn't have the kind of tape recorder you're supposed to have with the camera which is synched to the camera all the time.

Bull: Frames per second?

Babbs: Yeah, all that. So we had the reel-to-reel tape recorder, a Sony, and it runs on household current. So we had a generator in the back of the bus to provide the current and sometimes the generator would be going, "*dih-dih-dih-dih*", and other times it'd be going "*dididididid*," and other times, "*duuuuh-duuuuh-duuuuh-duhhhh*," and so that affected the speed of the sound. So that was what screwed us up because when you're editing, you have to transmit the sound from the two-track stereo to this magstripe which is the same size as the film and they run side by side on this editing projector, and oh my God, it was impossible to synch that sound up.

Bull: There have been people who have approached you and Ken Kesey, and said, "Hey, I'll make a movie for you, just give me the footage!" and then they'd bring it back a few weeks or a few months later. They just couldn't quite compile it.

Babbs: They couldn't do it either. No. Kesey said "Many have tried to climb this mountain and all have failed." But then the miracle of Steve Jobs putting all the Macs into the classrooms and our sons learning how to work the Mac. And you know when they put that in the classroom, they didn't just play around, they actually had to code and write in new programs and all that. So they really had to know what they were doing and so by this time video editing has come in, and this is in the 90s.

So they got us into that. and we bought video editing gear and we rented an office up in Pleasant Hill and we got to work on the bus movie and we were able to -on the computers- speed the sound up, slow it down, you know, make it work.

Bull: Wow.

Babbs: And so we did two, ah...part one of the movie, "The Journey East" and part two "North to Manhattan" and we had a machine there we got that would make seven copies at a time of the VHS tape. So we'd have the VHS master and we'd crank out seven of them.

Bull: Wow! So Steve Jobs is to thank for the completion of the movie, it sounds like.

Babbs: He was the instigator. Yes. *(laughs)* And God, we were selling like crazy. Money was pouring in. And that's when Kesey had his operation and caught the infection in the hospital and never came out. So we never did make part three which was going to be, "The Way Home: Back Cross Country."

Bull: Will that ever get made?

Babbs: I don't think so. Unless somebody else does it.

Bull: I remember there was a passage where Kesey also kind of butted heads with some of the suits in Hollywood over the movie version of “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.” And to this day, is it true that neither Kesey nor you ever saw the movie version that starred Jack Nicholson?

Babbs: That is true. Yeah, that's another good story in the book, where they came down to get him to write a screenplay and he wrote it and then they didn't use it. And so he sued them for breach of contract and won. The trial was in Eugene, and when it was over, the big suits from LA walked by and this one stopped to Kesey, and he said, “You may have won this case,” he says, “But I guarantee you'll be the first one in line to see that movie when it comes out.” And Kesey's, “I'll never see that movie.” And when he told me that, I said “I never will either.” *(laughs)*

Bull: You and Kesey were very tight, it sounds like very loyal friends to the very end.

Babbs: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. We really hit it off. We did things together, we really worked good together. And we had the same kind of imaginations. So when we tripped out and did stories, we were making up stuff and everything, we got really good at it. Our best scene was when he got busted for pot. He was supposed to get sentenced to prison. Instead he skipped out to Mexico.

Bull: Faked his suicide.

Babbs: Yeah, he faked his suicide. And skipped out to Mexico. And so we were doing , he had me take the Acid Test to LA there. And so we were doing the acid test in LA but then at midnight on Saturday night, LSD was becoming illegal. So in the middle of the acid test, I got all the Pranksters together and said “Let's get out of here before we get busted.”

And so we drove down to Mexico and we spent six months down there on two houses right on the beach in this little tiny Mexican town. It had a Purina warehouse next door that had this big room in there. We set up all our equipment in there. The tape recorders, and all the gear and everything. And it's our instruments because by then The Merry Band of Pranksters was actually a band. We started out playing trombone, and clarinet and trumpet and drums and flutes, and that. But by then we had moved into electric. Kesey on the guitar and singing. Mike Hagen on the backup guitar, and I played the bass, and...use my words, and Gretch (“Gretchen Fetchen”, a.k.a. Paula Sundsten) was on the piano, and George (Walker) was on the drums.

And so we started taping there on the two-track Ampex. With all of our abilities that we had picked up on up to that moment, making up stories and backing up with music, and then we'd overdub it. We'd listen to it and overdub it. And then I would go back and edit it until we had these perfect tapes. I don't know how many of them there are but...they now cannot be found.

Bull: No! Still in Mexico or did they get lost on the bus?

Babbs: Oh no, they came back to the States.

Bull: Okay, okay.

Babbs: So Zane Kesey says they may have gone with all the film and everything down to LA to the vault. So we'll see.

Bull: We'll see, fascinating.

Babbs: I know, because I have a friend of mine who digitizes reel-to-reel tapes. And he says "I will digitize those for you for nothing."

Bull: Well, good luck on the quest, I hope they turn up.

Babbs: Oh, me too!

Bull: It's interesting because I remember reading that portion about LSD becoming illegal in California and before that, you and others on the bus were watching "Dragnet" and the cops, Sergeant Friday and Gannon, were making reference to acid tests, and -

Babbs: And the bus.

Bull: Yeah, it was almost like the writers of "Dragnet" were referencing you folks directly.

Babbs: Oh, they were, absolutely. They said "There's a crazy painted bus driving down Sunset Boulevard with a big sign on the side: CAN YOU PASS THE ACID TEST?"

DRAGNET CLIP:

Policeman: You seen that bus up on the strip? Friday and Saturday nights? Big sign on it, says: "Can you pass the acid test? Pay a dollar and find out." For a buck they drive you up the Hollywood Hills to an acid party.

Gannon: Before we're through, they'll be listing it in the yellow pages. If we can just nail them for possession."

[END CLIP]

Bull: That must have been kind of strange to to...feel...but that was at the same time, I guess validation that you had made a big cultural footprint.

(Babbs laughs)

Bull: What were your thoughts then? When you saw that episode?

Babbs: Oh, it was funny as hell, we laughed our asses off.

Bull: Well, I think one thing that's coming to light now is the uses of LSD and psilocybin - from mushrooms- it's being researched. And I believe Oregon was the first state to legalize the use of psilocybin and it's being considered more and more as a therapy for PTSD, addiction, depression, and other ailments. And last year, Oregon decriminalized people for having small amounts of LSD or heroin or psychedelic mushrooms. So it seems for all the stigma that surrounded LSD, and other mind altering substances, there does seem to be an easing up, maybe an openness to exploring its therapeutic value.

Babbs: Absolutely. Because it has that value. Micro-dosing psilocybin, I think's a good idea, it sharpens your brain, keeps your body kind of toned up. You don't even feel the effects of it at all. It's not like you're ever high from it.

Bull: Ken, it's been a pleasure talking to you. Is there anything else at all you'd like to offer while I have the recorder going?

Babbs: Well, I can't think of anything. We covered everything. I'd want to wish everybody a wonderful New Year and to groove in the New Year and no matter what comes down, try to keep the wolf away from the door and the crazies. And everybody says "Well, what are you gonna do when they come in after you and your place with guns?" And I say "I'm out the back door and gone." And they say, "What, you're not gonna try and fight for your property?" and I'm "Hell no, I don't give a shit about the property, I give a shit about me and my wife and kids. Let's get out of here!" (*laughs*) I mean, I do care about the property, but there's certain things that are more important.

Bull: Some things can be replaced.

Babbs: Yes, yes. But a head can't. (*laughs*)



Photo provided by Dennis McNally.

Bull: All right. Where do you live? What do you do with your time?

Babbs: Well, I've got six acres of property of Lost Creek, right on the creek right outside of Dexter, and we have a milk cow and her calf, and a great little dog. And the place has got a lot of trees on it, and we have a woodstove so I really love cutting firewood, I'm out on the woods a lot, cutting firewood. It's good to go out and do that. Now (*laughs*) my publicist, Dennis McNally's got me doing an interview every day this month.

Bull: How many interviews have you done so far, counting this one?

Babbs: Oh, I don't have any idea, but lots. (*laughter*)

Bull: Well, good. Well, Ken, I wish you luck with your book. And I really appreciate you coming in to talk to me today.

Babbs: Well, thank you. I should say that the book is really big. I'm really happy with it. And I'm really happy to do all these, I write for the reader. I don't write for me, I want people to read and like what I've done.

Bull: Alright. Well, Ken Babbs, thank you very much again and take care.

Babbs: Bye bye.

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